

9/09/17
31 January 1980

STATINTL

CPYRGHT

FRANCE:

Diminished Fifth

Twelve weeks ago when Moroccan leftist leader Mehdi Ben Barka was kidnaped—and presumably murdered—in Paris, the cynical among the French wrote it off as a cloak-and-dagger episode that would go forever unsolved simply because it would not be in the official interest to have the case cleared up. But last week, although still far from solved, l'affaire Ben Barka erupted into a scandal that sent shivers through the entire French Government.

The lid finally blew off the Ben Barka case early in the week when one of the leading characters in the drama—a strange and intellectually inclined underworld figure named Georges Figon—died of a bullet through the head just as police burst into the Right Bank apartment where he was holed up. According to the police, his death was a suicide. But somehow, most Frenchmen found the story a bit hard to swallow.

More than two months earlier, Figon, 39, had admitted having helped set the trap that was sprung last Oct. 29 when the unsuspecting Ben Barka was picked up in broad daylight on a Left Bank sidewalk by two detectives, then whisked off to a suburban hide-out and, apparently, to a hideous death. A warrant for Figon's arrest was promptly issued, but in the weeks that followed it appeared that the only people who could not find him were the police. Acquaintances ran into him in his old haunts, he made himself accessible to journalists and flooded Paris newspapers with letters, phone calls and "eyewitness" accounts of Ben Barka's fate. (In one such account, Figon said he had seen Ben Barka beaten to a bloody pulp by four "retired" French gangsters, after which the diminutive Moroccan had been stabbed, tortured and left to die by the man Figon contended was really behind the plot: Morocco's flinty-eyed Minister of the Interior, Gen. Mohammed Oufkir.)

The climax of Figon's hide-and-seek game with the police, however, occurred early last week when the magazine Paris-Match published a double-page photograph of the "fugitive" strolling nonchalantly past police headquarters under the eyes of three bored cops. It was this which apparently stung the police into action, but when they did act, they won no plaudits. After Figon's death, a chorus of indignant newspaper editorials echoed the question that was uppermost in Parisian minds: why, when he could so easily have been captured alive anytime before, had swarms of heavily armed cops apparently frightened him into suicide?

What the public even more than Figon's death, however, was



Paris-Match



L'Express



A.P.I.S.

Oufkir, Ben Barka and Figon: A story hard to swallow

the revelation that officials of the Paris police force and of the SDECE—France's equivalent of the CIA—had been aware of the plot to kidnap Ben Barka well before it occurred and that even after the abduction both organizations had been remarkably slow to act. The most damaging of a flood of charges and counter-charges came from two men who had played vital roles in the kidnaping: an Air France airport official named Antoine Lopez and a Paris plain-clothes man named Louis Souchon. Lopez, who, on the side, worked for the French secret service, testified that he had informed his immediate superior in the service of the kidnap scheme before it was executed. Lopez's boss, one Maj. Marcel Le Roy, admitted that this was so. He also admitted that he had waited for two days before reporting the kidnaping to his superiors, explaining "straight-facedly that he had felt obliged not to disturb them during the long, All Saints' Day weekend."

Souchon, who with a fellow plain-clothes man had actually seized Ben Barka on the Left Bank sidewalk, unburdened himself of equally startling details. At least two top officials at the Paris police prefecture were aware of the plot in advance, he said. What's more, Souchon claimed that according to Lopez, a green light for the kidnaping had come from a senior aide to Interior Minister Roger Frey as well as from Jacques Foccart—a trusted Elysée Palace aide of General de Gaulle's and the real boss of France's secret agents.

Warrant: All this enraged Charles de Gaulle, one of whose proudest boasts it had been that the scandals which plagued the Third and Fourth Republics had disappeared under his regime. The general's first reaction was to retire the head of SDECE, Air Force Gen. Paul Jacquier, and to launch a sweeping reorganization of France's intelligence apparatus. Then, following a Cabinet meeting, a communiqué reportedly drafted by de Gaulle himself bluntly branded the Ben Barka kidnaping a "disgraceful and unpardonable duplicity of agents of French special serv-

ices or police." The French Government, in fact, appeared inclined to accept the widely held theory that General Oufkir—who has admitted to being in Paris just after Ben Barka's disappearance—planned the murder in order to prevent a reconciliation between Ben Barka and Morocco's King Hassan II. And on the strength of this suspicion, the prosecutor in the Ben Barka case last week issued an international warrant for Oufkir and two of his top aides.

de Gaulle put King Hassan in a difficult position. If he refused to hand Oufkir over to the French courts, he would be running the risk of a diplomatic break with France—and possibly even the loss of French economic aid to Morocco. But if he did surrender Oufkir, he could jeopardize his throne, since Oufkir who controls the Moroccan police is one of the country's most powerful men. Difficult as the choice was, however, Hassan would have to make up his mind soon, for the one thing upon which everyone agreed was that Charles de Gaulle was determined to remove the tarnish of the Ben Barka affair from his regime, no matter what the cost.